## Contents

Introduction .................................................. 1

**Chapter 1. The Child Subject in Robert Henri’s Art** .......................... 7

**Chapter 2. Black Subjects in American Visual Culture** ..................... 21

**Chapter 3. Henri’s Work, Philosophy, and Sylvester Portraits** .......... 34

Figures ................................................................... 59

Appendix ................................................................... 85

Bibliography .......................................................... 86
Robert Henri, an American painter active from the 1880s until 1929, is known for his philosophy on art and life, for his teaching career and famous students, and for his large body of portraiture. Scholars have examined various aspects of his career and painting: his work in relation to the Ashcan School, his Irish portraiture, and his ethnic minority portraiture, among other topics. This thesis focuses in on three of his mid-career portraits that feature a young, African-American newsboy named Sylvester Cunningham Smith. During a summer spent in La Jolla, California, Henri painted *Sylvester Smiling* (Fig. 1), *Negro Boy (Sylvester)* (Fig. 2), and *The Failure of Sylvester* (Fig. 3).

These three portraits of young Sylvester Cunningham Smith draw together multiple strands of meaning, both art-historical and cultural. The *Sylvester* paintings raise questions about the child in art, black subjects and the “other” in art, as well as Henri’s own motivations and ideas. All of these forces situate these portraits in a nexus of different meanings. At the core, however, these images are portraits of a child. Henri, seemingly fixated on children, painted hundreds of such images. What was the attraction for him? What can these particular portraits from one hundred years ago of Sylvester posing, laughing, or his “failure” – sleeping – tell us about art and society in 1914? This paper will follow inductive lines of reasoning drawn from the *Sylvester* portraits and Henri’s life to make arguments regarding the context and subtext of the images.

Robert Henri, born Robert Henry Cozad to John and Theresa Cozad, split his childhood between the frontier town of Cozad, Nebraska, and a Cincinnati boarding school.¹ In Cozad, founded by Henri’s father, a confrontation that ended with John Cozad shooting a man to death.

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forced the family to flee. Back east in New Jersey, the Cozad family changed their names and introduced their sons as foster children. Despite his disjointed childhood, Henri enjoyed artistic expression from a young age. His interests focused mainly on acting, writing, and art. With some outside encouragement, Henri chose to pursue painting and enrolled in the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts at age twenty-one. There, he studied under Thomas Hovenden and Thomas Anschutz – the latter a protégé of Thomas Eakins who led the previous generation of ground-breaking American artists.

Although he destroyed some of his earliest paintings, Henri’s surviving early works show his tendency from the start to paint using confident, distinct strokes (as opposed to smooth, invisible brushstrokes that hide the artist’s hand). He followed in the footsteps of artists like Eakins, who used a less-polished style to convey a sense of immediacy. Henri did not fit the mold of academic training, and chafed under the instruction of teachers who insisted on finished, highly-polished works from their pupils. In response to a critique from the famous academician William-Adolphe Bouguereau, Henri complained in his journal “I am working for the big impression – but he demands the careful completeness.” Henri finished his formal art education and began teaching part time in 1892.

In 1900, after a move from Philadelphia to New York, Henri’s work came into its own. His portraiture especially flourished. Henri found his artistic rhythm in painting professional portraits.}

\footnote{2 Henri Journal, Jan. 14 1887, quoted in Bennard Perlman, Robert Henri: His Life and Art, 9. While an art student in Philadelphia, Henri wrote after seeing a play “Every time I see such an actor I think that art is cheating the stage of an actor by gobbling on to me.” Henri Journal, Jan. 14 1887, quoted in Bennard Perlman, Robert Henri: His Life and Art, 9.}

\footnote{3 Perlman, Robert Henri: His Life and Art}

\footnote{4 Henri diary April 8, 1891, quoted in Perlman, Robert Henri. His Life and Art, 20.}

\footnote{5 Margaret Stenz, “Primitivism and nationalism in the portraiture of Robert Henri.” (PhD. diss., City University of New York, 2002), 19-20.}
models, his artist friends, and the occasional city dweller in a shadowy, dramatic manner reminiscent of the Old Masters. It was during this time in the city that the Ashcan School formed around Henri, a group of young newspaper sketch-artists who also studied fine art with the aid of Henri’s critiques. Henri challenged the artists in this group – George Luks, John Sloan, George Bellows, and others – to find and depict unconventional beauty, whether in portraits of immigrant children, of street vendors, in scenes of tenement houses, of nightclubs, or other urban subjects. Henri himself, however, soon put aside the cityscape as a subject to focus on portraiture. The few images Henri created of children during his early career stand out from his adult portraits. His paintings of his colleagues and professional models tended to be formal, full-length images. His paintings of children from this era, however, take a more intimate perspective that focuses on each subject’s face and expression.

The somber young man in *Portrait of Willie Gee* shows the style of his portraiture from this early point in his career (Fig. 4). This work foreshadows Henri’s later work that focused on the child subject, although here with a darker, subtler palette. *Portrait of Willie Gee*, from 1904 depicts one of the four black subjects – all children or adolescents – that Henri painted over the course of his career. The subject is a young New Yorker who delivered the paper to Henri’s studio. His slightly wrinkled brow suggests a pensive moment, and his relaxed gaze suggests his comfort with the artist painting him. Henri’s painting *Eva Green* from 1907 is his second work to depict a black child (Fig. 5). This work, like *Willie Gee*, uses dark tones and select highlights to emphasize the young sitter’s form. Eva Green’s warm skin and a large red bow stand out from the black garments, hat, and setting she is situated in. Both of these portraits present their sitters

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without caricature, and each is titled by name. These two earlier works therefore prefigure Henri’s three *Sylvester* portraits of 1914, which also depicted their young subject as a named individual rather than as a racial ‘type’ or as a caricature.

Beginning with a trip to Holland in 1907, where he painted local children in cycles of portraits, Henri’s work became dominated by the child subject. Rather than painting the children of New York City as he had early in his career, though, he sought out young subjects on his summer trips abroad. Between his Holland trip and his death in 1929, Henri created hundreds of oil portraits of children, ever searching for authenticity and purity in the faces of his young subjects. His 1914 trip to La Jolla, facilitated by his former student Alice Klauber, brought Henri into contact with the southwest. There, he painted children from various working-class backgrounds, including Sylvester.

Because the *Sylvester* paintings are portraits of a child, a subject that Henri became fixated on, the first chapter of this thesis is concerned with the child as a subject and theme in art. Chapter 1 will connect Henri’s work to previous art traditions of depicting children. It will argue that Henri’s child portraiture was highly influenced by seventeenth-century Dutch genre paintings, recalling the work of Frans Hals and Rembrandt van Rijn, two artists he greatly admired. These two Old Master artists, along with Spanish painter Diego Velázquez, represented the child subject in a naturalistic, sensitive manner that Henri admired and emulated. Thematically however, Henri’s child portraits seemed to continue the tradition of romantic street-child imagery that preceded him in the nineteenth century. Yet Henri’s portraits suggest meaning beyond the aesthetic appeal of romanticized childhood. This first chapter will argue that in his *Sylvester* works, Henri’s unpolished, quickly-executed painting manner captures emotion and a particular moment, but also conveys a symbolic sense of the child as archetype. Chapter 1
will discuss how this youth and other children functioned as symbols to Henri, and why he found
them so compelling. Through Henri’s representation, Sylvester, the 10-year-old subject of the
portraits in question, addresses his era as well as modern viewers.

In Henri’s Sylvester portraits, the subject’s race also informs the works. As in his earlier
portraits of black child subjects, Henri depicts Sylvester Cunningham Smith naturalistically,
devoid of any stereotype. Viewed alongside the ubiquitous racist black imagery of Henri’s time,
this fact alone is notable. Chapter 2 of this paper will address black stereotyping in the
Progressive Era (which encompasses the 1914 creation of the Sylvester works) and how the black
body was widely appropriated and distorted for advertising, art, and consumer culture. In so
doing, it will highlight the exceptionality of Henri’s paintings of Sylvester, works that question
the cultural structure that made misrepresentation of black Americans so common in the
Progressive Era.

These first two chapters set the stage for an analysis of Henri’s Sylvester works and, on a
wider scale, his preoccupation with children and the ethnic or social Other. Chapter 3 will
explore Henri’s fascination with these working-class minority subjects, “my people,” as he called
them, and how this interest was informed by his political views. This chapter will first
contextualize Henri’s Sylvester portraits by placing them in the art history narrative in 1914,
shortly after modernism was widely introduced to America through the Armory Show. It will
also contextualize these works in light of Henri’s philosophy on art, life, and society. Chapter 3
will argue that Sylvester, as a working-class child and as black American, successfully embodied
the aspects that Henri sought to represent in all of his portraits. However, Henri’s professed
connection with his models raises questions regarding his motives and self-perception. Is it
problematic that Henri, as a white, middle-class, adult male claimed such a rapport with these

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young, often marginalized individuals? Does it indicate a primitivistic projection onto his subjects? Is it merely an aesthetic bond made through the artist’s eye? Chapter 3 will formally analyze the Sylvester paintings themselves to address the themes of this paper and to make conclusions on the questions raised in the third chapter.
Chapter 1: The Child Subject in Robert Henri’s Art

“Children are greater than the grown man. All grown men have more experience, but only a very few retain the greatness that was theirs before the system of compromises began in their lives. I have never respected any man more than I have some children. In the faces of children I have seen a look of wisdom and of kindness expressed with such ease and such certainty that I knew it was the expression of a whole race.”

- Robert Henri, The Art Spirit

Robert Henri painted portraits of children throughout his career; they were his almost-exclusive subject by the end of it. His fascination with childhood led him to paint hundreds upon hundreds of children in America and Europe. His frequent return to this subject betrays his fascination with children, as does the laudatory quotation above. This chapter explores the artistic lineage Henri situated himself in by making images such as his Sylvester portraits, his interest in the child subject, and their symbolic relationship to the artist’s time period. I argue that Henri’s portraits of children ascribe to an idealistic, romantic philosophy without adopting the sentimental and polished visual style of romantic imagery of children. Rather, he used the painting style of his artistic heroes Frans Hals, Rembrandt van Rijn, and Diego Velázquez as inspiration for his own works. With a combination of optimistic ideals and a vigorous painterly method, Henri’s many child portraits emerge as iterations of the child-savior archetype theorized by Carl Jung. The Sylvester paintings are, arguably, among the most striking of these archetypal portraits of children, for both their execution and their subject matter.

The child subject is found in art from widely diverse locations and times, from Egyptian amulets to Rococo mythology paintings. However, our modern conception of childhood as innocent of and separate from adulthood was not imagined as such until the Enlightenment era.

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Children were previously imagined as small adults who were neither innocent nor free from the burden of original sin.\textsuperscript{10} Paintings of children focused on the subject’s future adult roles and responsibilities.

The idea of childhood as sexually innocent and intellectually unformed was brought to prominence with romantic imagery of children, which appeared in art and literature of the nineteenth century. The Romantic Movement came out of the mid-eighteenth century, and influenced art, literature, and other aspects of culture. Romantic depictions of children idealized childhood scenes of play, work, and family as idyllic and simple. Two centuries earlier, seventeenth-century Dutch art anticipated the child-as-pure theme by using children to embody moral messages aimed at adults.\textsuperscript{11} Artists visualized moral warnings in works that showed children imitating and encouraged by hedonistic adults.\textsuperscript{12} Additionally, the often naturalistic depiction of children in these works prefigured the nineteenth-century imagining of children’s bodies as distinct from adult bodies.

These two separate traditions, Romanticism and sixteenth-century Dutch, intersected in Robert Henri’s portraits of children. His works combined the aesthetics of Dutch painting from the 1600s with romantic thought from the nineteenth century. Henri painted in the manner of his artistic heroes Frans Hals and Diego Velázquez, but with an underlying romantic vision of the child as a symbol of pure, unspoiled humanity.

\textsuperscript{10} Higonnet, \textit{Pictures of Innocence}, 8-9.

\textsuperscript{11} Higonnet, \textit{Innocence}, 17.

\textsuperscript{12} Erika Langmuir, \textit{Imagining Childhood} (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006), 172-178. Langmuir shows how Dutch artists in the 1600s used child figures to underscore the sins of the older generations. She discusses two works, one by Jacob Jordaens and one by Jan Steen, that pun on the maxim “As the old have sung, so pipe the young.” These works depict scenes of music and revelry where children are coaxed to smoke pipes or to emulate their relatives’ lascivious and worldly indulgences.
From early in his art career, Henri admired and studied three of the “Old Masters”—the seventeenth-century artists Frans Hals, Rembrandt van Rijn, and Diego Velázquez, all of whom painted children. These European artists were formative influences in Henri’s portraiture. Henri was especially interested in Hals (c. 1582-1666), whose work he studied in Haarlem and Amsterdam during time abroad in Holland. Henri spent the summer of 1907 studying Hals’s works and painting dozens of child portraits in the Dutch artist’s manner. He painted two different girls repeatedly, always in single-sitter compositions that captured the young model’s demeanor in the moment. These two young models fit his idea of quintessential Dutch—light-haired, with pale skin and rosy cheeks. Henri depicted Cori Peterson, the younger of the two children, variously smiling and laughing. The paintings have a quick, gestural quality because he worked fast to capture these expressions. While studying the Dutch artist’s manner, Henri’s strokes became freer, suggesting the forms of his sitters more generally. Laughing Child (Fig. 6), a portrait of Cori from 1907, is reminiscent of a similarly-titled work by Frans Hals. Henri worked rapidly to paint the young girl’s smile, using broad strokes to model her face, cropped hair, and loose dress. Henri took his new, looser paint handling to its highest level in a portrait of a Dutch child made three years later, titled Dutch Joe (Jopie van Slouten) (1910; Fig. 7). Dutch Joe depicts the young subject grinning, his face modeled in thick brushstrokes that give just enough detail to define his musculature, hair, teeth, and clothing.

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13 Bennard Perlman’s biography of Henri, Robert Henri, His Life and Art (New York: Dover Publications, 1991), shows Henri’s career-long love of Frans Hals. This is evinced by Henri’s collection of photographs of Hals’ paintings, his mention of him in journal entries and class lectures, and his frequent return to see and copy his works in person in Dutch and French museums.

14 Bennard Perlman Robert Henri, 78. Perlman quotes correspondence from Henri to John Sloan, where he described his Dutch child models: “One of my two models is a little white-headed, broad-faced, red-cheeked girl…the other is just the opposite but just as Dutch—white, delicate, pathetic.”

From several centuries earlier, Hals’s painting *Laughing Boy*, (c. 1625; Fig. 8) shows the spontaneity of form and style that Henri emulated in his works. Frans Hals’s painting depicts the head of a young boy with unruly hair, framed by a lace collar and displaying a toothy grin. The image is composed of visible brushstrokes that define the form of the young boy’s face, collar, and hair. The boy’s locks and collar in particular are roughly-defined, yet still easily identifiable. The young subject appears naturalistic and expressive because Hals avoids the stilted result of overly-precise brushwork. Hals’s laughing boy is pale with rosy cheeks, much like Cori Peterson and Jopie van Slouten are in Henri’s portraits.

Hals’s oeuvre displays in varying degrees his characteristic textural brushstrokes. Like that of Henri and the Ashcan artists centuries later, Hals’s aesthetic broke away from the academic tradition of high polish and lofty subjects. These factors drew Henri to the seventeenth-century master. Henri’s works inspired by Hals were received as vigorous, even virile, works of art that spoke to American energy and, therefore, masculinity. The unrefined, broad brushstrokes that Henri adopted from Hals’s work defined the former, too, as an anti-academic artist.

Henri also took inspiration from the work of Spanish court painter Diego Rodríguez de Silva y Velázquez, who lived from 1599-1660. Like Hals, Velázquez painted portraits in a forward-looking naturalistic manner that conveyed the character of his sitters. Among his many royal portraits were those of the royal children who, although depicted in stiff, adult dress, are still naturalistic and childlike under Velázquez’s brush. His *Portrait of the Infanta Maria-Margarita at Age Four* (c. 1653, Fig. 9) shows the young princess in an ornate gown that reshapes her child’s body into an adult, hourglass form. However, Velázquez captures the

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softness of the *infanta’s* young face and gaze. She is not merely a miniaturized adult. “In the Infanta Margarita,” Henri wrote, “[Velázquez] united the look of a child with that of a queen.”17

Because of its sensitivity and virtuosic paint-handling, Velázquez’s portrait of the infanta has more in common with the vibrant, plebeian work of Frans Hals, than with stiffly formal royal portraiture.

Despite his status as an official court painter, Velázquez painted the marginal members of the court – namely the dwarves who served the royalty as jesters – who were not traditional high art subjects. His paintings of them, such as the portrait *Francisco Lezcano, ‘The Boy from Vallecas’* (c. 1640), are profound portraits that show their subjects as equally dignified as the royal family. Henri emulated this practice by gravitating to “lower” subjects for his portraits, the societally or economically marginalized. These were the subjects Henri claimed to understand and speak for through his art, a matter which will be further discussed in Chapter 3. Of Velázquez, Henri wrote with admiration: “Where others saw a pompous king, a funny clown, a misshapen body to laugh at, Velasquez saw deep into life and love, and there was response in kind for his look.”18

This non-condescending approach, Henri said in an interview, is how an artist must paint children. “I never try to ‘play down’ to the child. I merely try to place myself on his level… When a child poses for me I let him know unconsciously my respect for him. I may try to amuse him, but it is not as if he were an inferior. To me a child is a wonderful thing.”19

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Rembrandt Harmensz van Rijn was the third Old Master artist whose work Henri admired. Henri was enthralled with the vitality of Rembrandt’s ink drawings, the lines of which he described as “filled with a great man’s sense of life.”\textsuperscript{20} The Dutch artist sketched many small scenes and studies of mothers and children. He also depicted beggar children, perhaps the seventeenth-century equivalent of later paintings of child laborers. Rembrandt did not paint children as often as Frans Hals or Diego Velázquez, but those he did portray were sensitively-rendered and realistically childlike. Up until his summer in La Jolla in 1914, Henri also emulated Rembrandt’s style of portraiture through his use of dark theatrical settings with large contrasts between highlight and shade.

Despite his admiration of these seventeenth-century artists, Henri’s immediate historical precedent, and to an extent ideological framework, was the Romantic genre of nineteenth-century Europe and America. Popular imagery such as Currier and Ives prints, produced from c. 1835 to 1907, depicted children as idealized, simple characters such as the generic, loving sibling pair in \textit{Little Brother and Sister} (1863; Fig. 10). Famous paintings of children were copied and sold, too – Thomas Gainsborough’s \textit{Blue Boy} (1770), depicting a young boy in historical garb, was the most popular and reproduced image in the late nineteenth century.\textsuperscript{21} Expansion of mass printing and a burgeoning middle-class with expendable income led to the wide distribution of such images.\textsuperscript{22} It may be argued that the children in these pictures served as symbols of nineteenth-century America, its relative youth and its potential. Such images were hopeful and

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{20} Henri, \textit{Spirit}, 264.
\item \textsuperscript{21} Higonnet, \textit{Innocence}, 46
\item \textsuperscript{22} Higonnet, 32. Famed painter Adolphe-William Bouguereau, one of Henri’s instructors at the Académie Julien in Paris, was famous for his child genre scenes. These works were highly polished and sentimental, the exact qualities that Henri found so unsatisfying in academic art and pedagogy.
\end{itemize}
optimistic, and served as what Marilyn Brown calls “a site of emotional projection by adults.”

Henri continued this tradition but with a slightly different focus. His paintings of children almost always depicted working class children, often from non-white ethnicities. In the cities he painted various young workers such as Sylvester, the newspaper boy and subject of the main examples of this thesis. The most immediate child laborer imagery that Henri referenced in his Sylvester pictures arose and became popular in the nineteenth-century. The working children in the paintings of J.G. Brown, Henry Inman, and others exposed Americans to this new urban class in a selective, idealized manner. Countless images of newsboys, bootblacks, or flower sellers depicted cherub-like children working hard to earn honest wages. Often the children depicted were especially young and sweet-looking. The newsboy, in particular, became popular as a characterization of American entrepreneurial drive and self-motivation. Overall, these images were positive and rosy depictions of impoverished, working-class children.

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24 The exception to this was Henri’s interest in Irish children, whom he painted during visits to rural Achill Island. Jonathan Stuhlman’s and Valerie Ann Leeds’ essays in their publication From New York to Corrymore: Robert Henri and Ireland (2011), discuss Henri’s connection to Ireland, his portraiture of Irish subjects, and his involvement with Irish cultural nationalism in the United States.

25 Linda Pollock, foreword to Picturing Children: Constructions of childhood between Rousseau and Freud, ed. Marilyn Brown, xv. By the date of Henri’s portraits of Sylvester in 1914, the street-child phenomenon was much smaller than it had been in the previous century, before laws restricting child labor and providing mandatory schooling were instated.

26 Claire Perry, Young America: Childhood in 19th-century Art and Culture, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006), 113-115. Perry argues that paintings of street children were a “safe introduction” to a growing immigrant urban population that provoked social anxiety.

27 Perry, Young America, 115.
Popular genre-painter J.G. Brown epitomized this style with his sentimental street-child imagery. Brown shared some of Henri’s practices and beliefs. For instance, Brown paid working-class children to model for him, including black children (See *Give Him a Light*, Fig 11). (As in Henri’s era, depicting black subjects without overt caricature was atypical for genre painters of the era). Additionally, Brown urged American artists to look to their own land and countrymen for subjects instead of to the European subjects and styles that were popular at exhibitions. Henri was similarly concerned with American art autonomy and originality, although he painted many non-American subjects.

Aside from these aspects, Brown’s art was firmly situated in the academic tradition that Henri and the Ashcan school worked to distance themselves from. Brown’s paintings were highly staged and polished, lacking the spontaneity and visual texture of Ashcan works. His work *Tuckered out – The Shoeshine Boy* (c. 1888; Fig. 12) exhibits the picturesque nature of many of his paintings. The boy’s tattered clothing and slumped pose appeal to the picturesque’s preference for sentimentalized poverty and decay. However, the sleeping boy appears healthy, carefree, and impossibly clean. An oddly-prominent ring is displayed on his right hand. His shoe-stand, polish, and brushes identify him as a bootblack. *Tuckered Out* uses selective details

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29 Hoppin, *J.G. Brown*, 192. Henri, like Brown, wanted his students and all American artists to look to their home environments as inspiration for painting. The Ashcan school came out of this impulse to document life in New York City, where the Ashcan artists lived and worked. (In regard to his own work, made in Spain, Ireland, and elsewhere, Henri declared that the American quality of the artist shone through despite the subject matter. He wrote in an article for *The Craftsman* in 1909 that “the American painter, with brain and brush liberated by the greatest possible self-development, is just as certain to express the quality of his country as he is in himself to present an American type”).

30 Hoppin, 194-195
to identify the sleeping child as a working class boy, but one who does not threaten middle class American society with vices or uncleanliness.

The fact that the shoeshine boy is sleeping suggests the innocence of unawareness. This romanticizing view of the child is reiterated in Henri’s *The Failure of Sylvester*, although this image shows a momentary event rather than a staged scene. Brown’s carefully composed subject in *Tuckered Out* is depicted asleep on his shoe-stand, as if weary from a long day of polishing boots. His round face and wispy hair recall the sleeping cupid paintings of Italian Baroque artists like Guido Reni, for example. This reference, whether intentional or not, further idealizes the street boy; he is innocent, picturesque, and cherub-like. Images like these were hugely popular in the nineteenth century.

With the close of the 19th century, however, child imagery came to be seen as sentimental, and therefore feminine.31 The now-ubiquitous imagery became a lesser genre in the hierarchy of art, one that was deemed appropriate for women artists and illustrators. The child subject also became more commercial and therefore less significant in the art world. Henri’s choice to focus on children as subjects is therefore unusual. Some of his more picturesque portraits recalled Brown’s street urchin paintings. *Brown-Eyed Boy* (Fig. 13), a youth Henri painted in Ireland in 1926, wears tattered and disheveled clothes. Along with his attire, the boy’s meek pose and wistful expression hint at sentimentality. However, his sketch-like style, deemed bold and masculine by the critics, kept his work in the realm of “serious” art.32 Furthermore,

31 Higonnet, 39.

32 Antony Anderson, “Henri’s La Jolla Portraits,” *Los Angeles Sunday Times*, Sep. 20, 1914. This reviewer describes Henri’s work as “virile” and “strong” in this review. Henri and the Ashcan artists were generally perceived as masculine and bold by their critics. Julia Ince, in “The Critical Reception of Robert Henri's Portraiture: Rejuvenation in an Overly-Civilized Nation,” explains how the real-life subjects and loose painting styles employed by Henri and his circle formed the basis for such readings of their work. Academic art was cast as “feminine,” and the press played up the Ashcan artists as revolutionary and edgy, despite their general popularity and relative conservatism.
Henri’s child portraits rarely included any overtly maternal references. He also eschewed props such as toys that might detract focus from the sitter.

Unlike Brown, Henri passed over the image of the saccharine, idealized romantic child, preferring instead the convincingly empathetic single-sitter portrait style of the Old Masters, with their loose paint-handling and sparse backdrops. But although he did not adopt its aesthetic, romantic ideology did inform Henri’s work. His continual quest for “authentic” subjects in working-class and minority groups reveal his romanticizing ideas. Henri positioned himself as a democratic progressive who showed the nobility of the marginalized with his craft. He was influenced by peasant romanticist thought, the idea that the poor are naturally more honest and direct in both lifestyle and manner. Henri found this sincerity in subjects of various ages and backgrounds, but most often in children.

In an article for *The Craftsman* in 1915, Henri argued for the merits of authenticity through the expression of one’s innate being: “Everywhere I find that the moment order in Nature is understood and freely shown, the result is nobility; – the Irish peasant has nobility of language and facial expression; the North American Indian has nobility of poise, of gesture; nearly all children have nobility of impulse.” According to Henri, children, like various minority groups, possessed an innate and characteristic dignity and that he tried to capture in his portraits of them. He saw children as both a discrete group and as conduits that transmitted their “races.” In *The Art Spirit*, he wrote “In the faces of children I have seen a look of wisdom and of kindness…I knew it was the expression of a whole race.” Associating childhood, ethnicity or

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race, and sincerity, Henri situated the youth of various cultures and regions, whether rural Ireland or southwestern California, in a framework of cultural primitivism. As Margaret Stenz defines it, cultural primitivism is a “romanticization and mystification” of pre-industrial or rural people groups. To Henri, children everywhere were part of this group of uncorrupted beings who lived, in ideal settings, according to their nature.

This romanticized child was, for Henri, a symbol of America’s potential for greatness in the heady pre-World War years. Children, according to the artist, possessed a simple view of life that made them honest to themselves and their world, a “greatness” that most lose by adulthood. The child symbolized progress and vitality to Henri. In this sense, his portraits manifested the child archetype that was later theorized and described by Carl Jung (although Jung’s work was not important to Henri). Jung’s thought on archetypal symbols and Henri’s philosophy of art mesh well, despite their different disciplines. Jung developed the term archetype to mean a symbol that is part of the collective unconscious that passes down through generations of humanity. Jung defines archetypes as “the unconscious images of [human] instincts” that are inherited rather than acquired. Jung described figures and events as subtypes of this unconscious symbol that appear in dreams, art, and story across different times and cultures. Archetypal figures are most relevant to Henri’s work because of his endless fascination

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36 Stenz, “Primitivism and Nationalism,” 10.

37 Henri, Art Spirit, 235-236.


40 Jung, “The Archetypes and the Collective Unconscious,” 44.
with portraiture. The most famous of Jung’s archetypal figures include the wise old man, the mother, the maiden, and the child.

Jung argued that these archetype figures are seated deep in the human psyche, and emerge in different eras as motifs. In art, they are expressed in the form needed for the artist’s age. Although primordial forms, they are updated as a symbol that is relevant for each era. In an essay on literature, Jung wrote:

The creative process, so far as we are able to follow it at all, consists in the unconscious activation of an archetypal image, and in elaborating and shaping this image into the finished work. By giving it shape, the artist translates it into the language of the present, and so makes it possible for us to find our way back to the deepest springs of life. Therein lies the social significance of art: it is constantly at work educating the spirit of the age, conjuring up the forms in which the age is most lacking. The unsatisfied yearning of the artist reaches back to the primordial image in the unconscious which is best fitted to compensate the inadequacy and one-sidedness of the present.41

Henri would likely agree with Jung’s assertion that archetypes surface in art as the artist’s unconscious response to society. The painter also believed that art points to the happiest, most transcendent parts of life, perhaps what Jung terms “the deepest springs of life.” Without art, Henri wrote, “the world would stagnate.”42

Henri’s repeated return to the child subject suggests an archetypal quality to his work. The wonderful, ideal child described in his writings appears with many different faces and settings in his portraits, but it is the unhampered essence of childhood itself that attracted the artist. Whether intended or not, children and childhood appear in Henri’s works as the response

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42 Henri, Spirit, 11.
to societal problems. This child-hero archetype has appeared in religion and literature as the savior-child; the unlikely source of help for a threatened people. These young heroes, such as David against Goliath or Saint-Exupery’s Little Prince, are often aided by or in touch with divine forces. The savior-child represents an innocent, intact soul that possesses the qualities necessary to rejuvenate his country or tribe.

Partly because of what might be seen as their child-savior symbolism, Robert Henri’s portraits were popular with critics and the public who accepted the works as visual antidotes to America’s perceived over-civilization. The unrefined, confident manner of his painting and his frequent choice of working-class subjects appeared refreshing to Progressive-Era Americans coming out of the restrictive Victorian Age. Americans advocated a return to a simpler time; childhood represented just that. In Jungian thought, these images were so well-received because they were a response to a lack in their era. Henri’s images functioned as symbols of rejuvenation – literally meaning to make young – for his country. As he himself remarked in *The Art Spirit*, “He [the child] is the great possibility, the independent individual.”

The young subjects in Henri’s paintings were also viewed as embodiments of universal thoughts or people groups. Almost paradoxically, as Rebecca Zurier and Robert Snyder observe, “Henri’s reputation for individuality grew, as did his ability to find the universal in the topical.”

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46 Henri, *Spirit*, 244.

“race,” and his portraits of children were a type that represented the vitality of Henri’s time. The Sylvester portraits, with which this thesis is concerned, are part of Henri’s large body of portraits of children. They are both archetypal and individual. However, the fact that Sylvester is a black child complicates these portraits, and raises questions regarding their reception during a time of extensive racist imagery that used distorted black subjects. The next chapter discusses the usage of black visual stereotypes during the Progressive Era in America, and how Henri’s Sylvester portraits relate to this time.
Chapter 2: Black Subjects in American Visual Culture

Contrary to its optimistic name, the Progressive Era marked a low point for black Americans. Nationwide, practices such as legal segregation and mob murders of black men and women were part of American life. Famously Progressive presidents Teddy Roosevelt and Woodrow Wilson, whose terms bracketed the era, did not advance the standing of black America, despite furthering other reform movements. Those working to advance American society “always stopped short of the color line.”

These grim societal conditions for black Americans were reflected in a pervasive culture of racist imagery. Popular art and entertainment purveyed the message that black Americans were incapable, dangerous, servile, or a combination of the above. The America of this era was preoccupied with keeping blacks marginalized under a sweeping public image of them that responded to society’s racist fears and constructs. Anxiety regarding black advancement in society drove white America to vilify and demean the black image.

The nation’s visual culture and reality formed an atmosphere of oppression for the black American. American advertisers and artists created images that reinforced concerns regarding the “Negro Problem” and these fears in turn dictated the creation of such imagery. This positive feedback loop both created and affirmed negative societal conceptions of black Americans. This chapter describes briefly some of the issues facing black Americans and discusses their representation in popular visual culture in the early twentieth century. Its aim is to contextualize Robert Henri’s depictions of black subjects: Sylvester and the handful of other black children he

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painted. This chapter argues for the importance of Henri’s *Sylvester* portraits, in particular, in light of contemporaneous ideology that manifested itself in racist visual culture.

The Progressive Era, the name given to the years 1890-1917 (sometimes through the 1920s), marked an especially troubled time to be a black American. In the midst of child, worker, and women’s rights advances, the plight of blacks in America was overlooked. In fact, their situation worsened during this time.

The Progressive Era saw segregation validated by law. Most Jim Crow laws came from the early 1900s (although restrictive legislation regarding black Americans was passed well into the 1930s). America had regressed since its attempts at post-Civil War reconstruction. Discrimination in both the north and south of the nation prevented black Americans from holding all but the most menial or dangerous jobs or from accessing living conditions equal to whites.

At the moment when Henri painted *Sylvester*, toward the end of the Progressive Era, Woodrow Wilson had been in office for one year. Wilson had secured the vote of black rights activists like W.E.B. Du Bois and Oswald Garrison Villard with promises of redressing injustices against black Americans. However, the new president disappointed on this issue by failing to speak out against lynching and by formally segregating the entire government bureau. He

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53 Southern, 125-129.
displayed his attitude toward black Americans when he remarked that the inflammatory, racist propaganda film *Birth of a Nation* was “all so terribly true.”\(^{54}\)

Wilson also filled his government with fellow southerners who were not interested in advancing civil rights. While running for office, Wilson chose newspaper editor Josephus Daniels as his chief campaign strategist – an active white supremacist who worked to suppress the black vote and to instigate race riots in his native North Carolina.\(^{55}\) Like many before him, President Wilson did not upset the status quo. Black Americans saw no advocacy from their government at this time. In his 1903 work *The Souls of Black Folk*, W.E.B. DuBois described the experience of black Americans at this time, and how it felt to be a “problem.”\(^{56}\)

Theoretical underpinnings based on Anglo-Saxon supremacist thought supported the racial hierarchy of this era. Racial pseudoscience that began in the nineteenth century as a justification of slavery continued on into the twentieth as a rationalization for the continued suppression of blacks. This “discipline” studied races as completely separate entities, some civilized and others uncivilized. Black Americans were perceived as an insular group low on the scale of racial value. The claim of Anglo-Saxon supremacy over all other white and non-white people was made by leading American thinkers and politicians, and was propagated in schools.\(^{57}\) Additionally, the latest pseudo-scientific ideas were often spread to the public through exhibitions and booths at world fairs.\(^{58}\)


\(^{57}\) Southern, 36.
This phenomenon intersected with Robert Henri’s life through the San Diego Panama-California Exhibition of 1915-1916, and through his relationship with Dr. Edgar Hewett. While in La Jolla and through the influence of Alice Klauber, Henri was invited to curate the art display at the San Diego exhibition. Valerie Ann Leeds argues that Henri’s friendship with Dr. Hewett is what inspired his interest in Native Americans of Southwestern California and other ethnic “types” in the area.⁵⁹

Edgar Hewett was the director of the American Institute of Archaeology, who accepted the role of Director of Exhibits for the celebratory exhibition. Hewett had studied the Pueblo people and other indigenous groups in New Mexico. He viewed Native American cultures as American counterparts to classical civilizations elsewhere in the world, and had a vision of spreading knowledge and appreciation of indigenous southwestern cultures to the exhibition’s visitors.⁶⁰ This outlook seems to suggest that Hewett did not share contemporary ideas on white supremacy, but the anthropology exhibits he oversaw at the Exhibition may show otherwise. These displays purported to show the evolution of humanity, which was conceived of as a racial transformation. They featured human skulls that were typed according to differing “capacities,” and a disturbingly-titled “Race Betterment Booth.”⁶¹ Eugenics was proposed as a means to this “betterment.” According to David Southern, this racial pseudo-science was “everywhere on

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⁵⁸ Ibid.


⁶¹ Southern, 52.
display at the fairs, justifying white economic and political control of dark-skinned people at home and abroad.”

Henri’s summer in La Jolla brought him into contact with another aspect of American racial thought: Southern California was perceived by some thinkers as a haven of racial “rejuvenation” for Anglo-Saxon Americans. (Progressive-Era Americans often used the term “race” broadly to signify nationality or ethnicity). Americans of Anglo-Saxon descent believed themselves to be a separate race from whites of Eastern or Southern European extraction. Books such as Race Life of the Aryan Peoples, published in 1907 by physician Joseph Pomeroy Widney, claimed Southern California as the land of the Anglo-Saxon. This group would thrive there, advocates explained, by escaping the immigrants in eastern cities and overpowering the Native Americans in California. Many white Americans living in this region espoused these ideas.

While La Jolla in particular was not framed as an “escape” for Anglo-Saxon Americans, it did cater to this group. It was a resort town for the leisure class, supported by black workers who worked with white families as domestic laborers or who commuted from San Diego. The fact that white La Jollans referred to the area of town where most black La Jollans lived as “The

62 Ibid.
65 Starr, Inventing the Dream, 90-92.
66 Ibid.
Quarters” reveals the racial power dynamic in the town.\textsuperscript{68} This history raises issues regarding the relationship between artist and subject in Henri’s \textit{Sylvester} portraits. Chapter 3 will further examine the implications of these images.

All told, the ideological climate in Southern California in 1914 was focused on white, Anglo-Saxon primacy. Although Henri left no records of his reaction to this racial philosophy, he must have been exposed to it on multiple levels through his involvement in the San Diego exposition and through daily life in Southern California.

Although we might assume a society’s visual production comes only as a response to its actions, this was not necessarily true of Progressive Era America. Vicious stereotypes had real effects on African-Americans during this time. They were not merely a reaction to society. White citizens and policy-makers acted according to their perception of black Americans as seen in visual culture and entertainment. Henry Louis Gates explains that, in the early twentieth-century, “[p]ublic policy decisions affecting African-Americans were often predicated upon such fictitious black citizenry created by white painters, sculptors, writers, and illustrators.”\textsuperscript{69} The ubiquitous, demeaning images of this era led to actual crimes committed against black Americans, including many lynchings that went unpunished.\textsuperscript{70}

As economist Richard Merelman explains, ideas and images often work together to create a dominant class or group. The visual culture of a group within a society – here white Americans

\textsuperscript{68} Daly-Lipe and Dawson, \textit{La Jolla}, 17.

\textsuperscript{69} Henry Louis Gates, Jr., “The Face and Voice of Blackness,” in Guy McElroy, \textit{Facing History: the Black Image in American Art, 1710-1940} (San Francisco: Bedford Arts, 1990), xxix. Stereotypes either emasculated or demonized black men, and usually masculinized black women. Policies and actions were therefore paternalistic, to accommodate “childlike” black Americans, or were harsh and cruel to suppress “brutish” violence of black males.

\textsuperscript{70} Linda Tucker, \textit{Lockstep and Dance: Images of Black Men in Popular Culture} (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2007), 52.
– contributes to that group’s “ideological hegemony.” In the so-called progressive years from 1890-1914, black stereotypes were promoted and believed by Americans looking to suppress and harm their black countrymen. White America created fictional black characters that were then used to spur on injustices against black Americans.

While Progressive - Era visual culture frequently depicted complacent “Mammy” or ragged “Jim Crow,” black artists were given no chance to create a response to this imagined black everyman. Indeed, black artists were not accepted at all, in popular or fine arts, until the 1920s. One black artist who achieved fame during this era is Henry Ossawa Tanner. Tanner, however, moved abroad and spent most of his career as an American expatriate. His art occasionally depicted black subjects, such as the famous grandfather and grandson pair in his work *Banjo Lesson*. Tanner’s time as a student at the Pennsylvania Academy of Art, Henri’s alma mater, was fraught with harassment. The artist experienced much better treatment while studying in Paris at Julian’s, another school attended previously by Henri. In fact, these two men overlapped in Paris, with Henri writing of meeting Tanner at a café and giving him “a start” as a new student at Julian’s. The hostile environment in the United States, however, made it impossible for black artists like Ossawa Tanner to achieve artistic success.

Although no individual black artists were able to find success in Progressive Era America, the nation was fascinated with black culture as a whole. America both embraced and altered black culture for its own purposes, while keeping black Americans themselves disenfranchised. African-American culture was simultaneously co-opted and derided by the


73 Robert Henri, Diary of Robert Henri, (Journal 0030, 0597, 1886), Smithsonian Archive of American Art, Roll #885.
majority culture. The black American him- or herself had no power, but black culture was foundational for popular music and dance arising in this time. The caricatured black body appeared in a wide range of settings. These visual stereotypes monopolized virtually all imagery depicting blacks. Typed images of black figures permeated many aspects of American visual culture. Stereotyping of non-Anglo-Saxon people groups was acceptable to Progressive-Era Americans. European immigrants and religious and ethnic minorities were the brunt of visual and ideological stereotyping, but the most vicious of these labels and images were reserved for black Americans.

Black caricatures appeared as a marketing tool on consumer items, onstage as comic figures, and in film and news as a threat to societal order. The black body was at once mimicked, feared, and mocked through various media. It was usurped and distorted by white minstrel performers at the expense of real black artists. It was demonized in the wildly popular 1915 film *Birth of a Nation*, that depicted black men intent on raping white women, and the Ku Klux Klan who thwarted them. The black image, however, was not considered a subject for “high” art. Per the efforts of American elites, the perception of “high culture was unmistakably European in origin,” while low culture derived from non-white peoples.

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75 Zurier, *Picturing the City*, 125. “The Irish might be [caricatured as] violent, but they were also characterized as bighearted. Jews were often credited with being smart, if conniving. The best that turn-of-the-century stereotypes could say about blacks was that they were childlike...Almost all visual depictions of blacks in film and advertising, as well as cartoon and fine-art images, were caricatures.”

76 González, *News for All the People*, 211.

77 Brundage, “Kingdom of Culture,” in *Beyond Blackface*, 5.
In the world of consumer goods, a set of black characters appeared repeatedly in settings as diverse as sheet music illustrations, salt-and-pepper shakers, and commercial pancake mixes. The rise of mass production in the post-Reconstruction years allowed manufacturers to create and distribute objects that advertised ideas of black inadequacy. As Kenneth Goings writes, this imagery “gave a physical, tangible reality to the idea of racial inferiority.” The characters, such as Uncle Tom and Zip Coon, embodied servility or comic entertainment value. Uncle Tom (Fig. 14) was an elderly servant character who was reassuringly contented and happy, reinforcing nostalgia for an idealized pre-emancipation southern society. Zip Coon (Fig. 15) was a carefree “dandy” character who dressed in ostentatious clothes, a favorite for minstrel performers who used this persona to mock urban black men. White America reproduced these images and characters endlessly to enforce negative views of black Americans.

A popular song from the era, and its sheet music cover design, exemplifies this use of characters. “The Aunt Jemima Slide” (Fig. 16) from 1917 sings of a dance that “darkies” perform. The cover of the sheet music features the title character herself, a large black-shaded figure with an exaggerated red mouth and pig’s snout nose. She wears the shapeless maid

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78 Stephanie Dunson, “Black Misrepresentation in Nineteenth-Century Sheet Music Illustration, in Beyond Blackface, 46.

79 Kenneth Goings, Mammy and Uncle Mose: Black Collectibles and American Stereotyping (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994), xiii. Goings argues that black stereotypes used as consumer items affirmed existing prejudices that white America created after Reconstruction to marginalize black Americans. These absurd material items, Goings argues, acted as surrogates of blacks to whites who had little to no contact with their black fellow Americans (xiv-xxi).

80 Jim Crow Museum of Racist Memorabilia, “Caricatures,” Ferris State University. http://www.ferris.edu/html/news/jimcrow/index.html#. This web resource provides detailed information and imagery on black American caricatures and the visual and material culture that utilized them in the 19th and 20th centuries. Its aim, as stated on its main page, is achieved by “using objects of intolerance to teach tolerance and promote social justice.” As Guy McElroy argues in Facing History, contemplating these racist images and the assumptions that underlie them reduces their power, and is the means to bury “lingering ghosts” of racist stereotype (xxiii).

clothing and head scarf she is usually depicted with. “Aunt Jemima” dances in a bare room with a comically thin male figure, whose large mouth is distorted even more than Aunt Jemima’s. His eyes are represented by vacant white circles. At the window to the right of the dancing figures, three “pickanniny” children watch the couple, their apelike features wearing surprised expressions.82

The black figure appeared in fine art as well, but as mentioned above, almost exclusively as the creation of white artists, and rarely without negative stereotypes attached. Black figures, including black children, appear in the work of several American painters that predate Henri and his Sylvester portraits. Winslow Homer is one artist who painted black subjects, usually in genre scenes, throughout his long career. His popular painting The Watermelon Boys from 1876 (Fig. 19) shows both his sensitive approach to painting children and his inability to rise above stereotypes.

The scene depicts three boys, two black and one white, who have stopped in a field to enjoy slices from a large watermelon. The central figure, a black boy, looks over his shoulder warily. The black figures in this work are realistically depicted, but they are still painted in a stereotypical framework of laziness – a trope that is in several others of Homer’s works (such as The Bright Side depicting resting black teamsters, and Army Boots, portraying two black boys shirking their duties (Fig. 20). The children’s neglected schoolbooks suggest idleness, and the watermelon held racist connotations of minstrelsy even at this early date.83 As Guy McElroy argues, however, Homer’s view of black subjects became more nuanced and less stereotyped as

82 The “pickaninny” type caricatured black children as hapless and awkward. They were often depicted with skinny limbs, bulging eyes, and large red mouths (Fig. 17, 18). Pickaninny girls almost always appear with braids that stand up on their head, per Harriet Beecher Stowe’s description of her character Topsy in Uncle Tom’s Cabin. Claire Perry writes in Young America : Childhood in 19th-Century Art and Culture that “In particular, the black child was pictured as an amusing subject beneath the status of virtually everyone, allowing it to serve as an inside joke that united disparate classes, regions, and political groups” (78).

83 McElroy, Facing History, 81.
his career continued.\textsuperscript{84} Furthermore, the presence of the white boy in \textit{The Watermelon Boys} is notable, suggesting racial integration.\textsuperscript{85} Overall, Homer’s genre scenes and portraits of black children he created are quite sensitive and expressive compared to those of his contemporaries. However, these works show subtle stereotypical implications that suggest Homer did not free himself of such influences and ideas.

Thomas Hovenden, a Pennsylvania Academy instructor who taught Henri, also depicted black figures in his art. His works in this vein used caricature types, such as \textit{I Know’d It Was Ripe} (Fig. 21) from 1865, which turned to the watermelon stereotype in its depiction of a smiling black boy. Even Henri’s early art inspiration, Thomas Eakins, slipped into stereotypical imagery when painting black subjects. His work \textit{Negro Boy Dancing} avoids physiognomic caricature, but still depicts a scene that was popular among white audiences: black people playing the banjo and dancing.\textsuperscript{86}

Two artists in Henri’s circle, George Luks and George Bellows, depicted black subjects from time to time. These two Ashcan artists worked in different visual styles, but each focused on the working-class inhabitants of New York City. Luks and Bellows were interested in city “types,” or those they perceived as ethnic groups with distinct, often stereotyped, characteristics.\textsuperscript{87} For instance, Luks depicted bustling Jewish neighborhoods, while Bellows drew and painted Irish children.

Luks and Bellows also depicted black children in drawings and illustrations. Bellows’ work \textit{Tin Can Battle, San Juan Hill, New York} depicts a scene of black youths pelting each other

\textsuperscript{84} Ibid. 78.

\textsuperscript{85} Perry, \textit{Young America}, 94-95.

\textsuperscript{86} Ibid. 102-103.

\textsuperscript{87} Rebecca Zurier, \textit{Metropolitan Lives}, 122.
with cans while black adults look on (1907; Fig. 22). The figures are gawky and caricatured, as were other ethnic types in Bellows’ drawings. Luks’s work as an illustrator dictated that he use grotesque racial caricatures (he was hired to draw The Yellow Kid in the style of R. F. Outcault). His cartoon children were universally racially typed, but the worst caricatures were those that depicted black children. Luks’s cartoon Mose and the Pickaninnies Have a Crap Game and Uncle Remus Enjoys It (1897; Fig. 23) shows the grotesque caricatures that the artist employed to represent black figures. This illustration depicts a gaggle of black children, with uniformly round, shiny heads and large white eyes, engaged in a dice game with a scrawny rooster. A seated mammy figure looks on from the right as she works with her hands, a skinny hound and a toddler at her knee. From a window in the upper center of the drawing, Uncle Remus, identifiable by his corncob pipe, white beard, and bulging white eyes, grins at the scene. Luks’s characters would have been familiar to his audience, their distorted features and dilapidated setting functioning as signifiers of humor.

Wayman Adams, who studied with Henri, was influenced by his teacher’s quick, vigorous style. He painted various black subjects, but usually in a typed manner – black nurses and coachmen rather than named individuals. As Guy McElroy argues, Adams adopted Henri’s loose style but retained a racist framework, as evidenced by his choice of painting title New Orleans Mammy, from 1920 (Fig. 24). Adams’ work represents a visual step towards Henri’s progressive depiction of black subjects, but he lacked a similarly egalitarian outlook.

Even in the world of fine art painting, black subjects rarely escaped visual or verbal caricature. With rare exception, this mirrored the derisive black imagery that flooded popular culture in the Progressive Era. Henri’s portraits of Sylvester, made during this period, have no ostensible referents to the racist imagery or consumer items that were ubiquitous at the time.

88 McElroy, xix-xx.
Why might Robert Henri have chosen to paint a black child, the “inside joke” of American visual culture that Claire Perry describes? Are his *Sylvester* images as free of caricature as they appear to be? And finally, why are they relevant among Henri’s large oeuvre of child portraiture?

Chapter 3 will discuss Henri’s philosophies on humanity and art and the possible meanings of the *Sylvester* works.

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89 Perry, *Young America*, 78.
Chapter 3: Henri’s Work, Philosophy, and *Sylvester* Portraits

“[Robert Henri] is a born painter, strong, virile, individual, and for that reason he isn’t a born teacher. His job is to turn out pictures, not pupils.”


The reviewer who wrote these words would be surprised at Robert Henri’s reputation in today’s art world. Despite his large oeuvre, Henri is valued in the narrative of art history more for his ideas and teaching than for the art he created. Henri spearheaded an anti-academic art movement that inspired the Ashcan artists and many of his students to paint their cities and experiences rather than traditional fine art subjects. However, Henri’s mode of painting became quickly conservative and passé by comparison when European modernism burst on the scene in 1913. His work has since been overlooked in favor of the work of Henri Matisse, Pablo Picasso, and other European modernists.

This paper argues, however, that Henri’s works, notably his *Sylvester* paintings, are important because they embody Henri’s unusually progressive political philosophy and the optimism of Progressive Era America. In many ways, these three portraits validate his claim to be a modernist. Although he indulged in a romanticizing view of certain ethnic and socioeconomic classes, Henri’s refusal to play into traditional racist stereotypes on the one hand and modernist primitive fantasy on the other, marks him as ideologically progressive. His *Sylvester* portraits show a young black boy devoid of caricature or ethnographic generalization. While relatively conservative stylistically, these works are as conceptually remarkable as many of the more visually radical works being made at the time. Robert Henri has, to an extent, faded

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from art history because of his ostensible intransigence in the face of huge social upheavals, and because of his zealous insistence on a distinctive American mode of art. His three portraits of Sylvester Cunningham Smith, however, merit attention because of their subject and style. These paintings show Robert Henri’s optimistic humanism and his progressive stance toward marginalized groups.

**Robert Henri: a modern artist?**

Robert Henri was in the artistic vanguard during the first part of his career, but his mostly unchanging style allowed him to be overshadowed by modern art movements originating from Europe. The 1913 Armory Show that introduced the American public to key European artists like Marcel Duchamp and Pablo Picasso marked a large break with art up to that point. Henri and many other American artists showed works at this exhibition, but it was the small contingent of European modernists that stoked public curiosity, helping to bring in the show’s 90,000 visitors. At the Armory Show, Henri exhibited three paintings of figures, two portraits and one full-length female nude advancing toward the viewer titled *Figure in Motion* (1913). *Figure in Motion*, while striking in its own right for its realism and immediacy, seemed understated and timid compared to the nudes of the European modernists – especially Duchamp’s *Nude Descending a Staircase* (1912) and Henri Matisse’s *Blue Nude* (1907). As a whole, Robert Henri’s naturalistic portraits seemed outmoded with the arrival of works stemming out of Futurist and Cubist movements that abandoned realism. Did Robert Henri view himself as a modern artist? In a letter to friends from Santa Fe (c.1915), he wrote

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I have painted [Native American subjects in Santa Fe] as I felt without regard to fashions old or new. I feel myself a decided modern though not of the modernistic school and am egotist enough to give all my thought to what interests me. If it is art, all right. If it is not art, all right. If it is liked I am overjoyed, if it is not I can’t help it. I am having a wonderful time in my life. Human faces are incentives to clairvoyance. The picture is the trace of the adventure and to me that is the only reason for valuing a portrait or of its being of interest in any way to others.\footnote{Robert Henri, letter to Mary and Bill Roberts, n.d., quoted in Homer, \textit{Robert Henri and His Circle}, 203-204). This undated letter is from Santa Fe, which indicates that its date is 1915 or later, the year Henri first travelled there.}

It is possible to read this correspondence as Henri coming to terms with his place in the art world, far behind the advance guard he once led. In it, he declares that he pays no attention to currents in the art world, painting only what interests him. Whether it is “art” or not, or whether it is well-received, he claims indifference. This apparent indifference may be an oblique allusion to Henri’s ever-destabilizing art world that had left traditional painting subjects and forms behind, challenging even the conception of what could be considered art. For example, in 1913 Marcel Duchamp had created his first readymade object by mounting a bicycle fork and wheel on a stool. Henri may have realized that his traditional, single-sitter oil portraits were, in the art world, picturesque and conservative when considered next to the work of Duchamp and others.

Alfred Stieglitz, modern art gallery owner and photographer, articulated his opinion of traditional art schools that continued “breeding little Chases, little Henri’s, and little Alexanders…”\footnote{Perlman, \textit{Robert Henri}, 108.} William Merritt Chase and John White Alexander were two American artists who were of an older, more conservative generation than Henri and the Ashcan artists. To be grouped with them implied that Henri was unadventurous and outdated. Stieglitz’s wording suggests that all three of
these artists and teachers stifled artistic individuality in their students, instead producing slavish imitators.\textsuperscript{94}

In his letter to Mary and Bill Roberts, Henri also emphasizes that his interest in the human form, one he explored his entire career, drove his work. Although Henri did not discount avant-garde art, he did not feel that its new forms could properly portray his ideas or the “trace of the adventure” that he sought to capture in his subjects’ faces and bodies.\textsuperscript{95} Because he followed his artistic preferences, Henri did very few portrait commissions, preferring instead to pay people of his choosing to model for him. He painted portraits of people in New York City and during his summer travels, individuals such as the boy who delivered his newspapers or the town vegetable seller.

William Innes Homer argues that by the time of the Armory Show in 1913, Henri had mostly won his fifteen-year long campaign for artist’s rights and for freedom outside the academy system of juried exhibitions.\textsuperscript{96} The artist had established himself as a preeminent American painter, had won many awards for his paintings, and had sold works to various museums. Henri was a popular and populist artist, well-known for his portraiture. Having secured his position as an independent artist, Henri no longer needed to submit works for large annual exhibitions, and had the liberty to even further pursue his artistic and philosophical curiosity.\textsuperscript{97} Because of this, he seemed to have lost touch with current developments in art by the time of the Armory show. But Henri was cognizant of the accelerated changes in the art world.

\textsuperscript{94} This is exactly the practice Henri railed against in his writings, advocating instead that students think for themselves above all else. In \textit{The Art Spirit}, he wrote that “Every individual should study his own individuality to the end of knowing his tastes” (85). Later in the volume, he urged his students “to investigate, to read, to think…wake up to the fact that the only education that counts is self-education” (210).


\textsuperscript{96} Homer, \textit{Robert Henri}, 247.

\textsuperscript{97} Homer, 247.
outside his portrait studio. In his classes, he used as examples several artists who broke the rules of conventional representation, exposing his students to the work of Cézanne, Whistler, and Gauguin.\textsuperscript{98} He advised his students to study the work of Henri Matisse and Max Weber even before the Armory Show, two artists who worked with radically non-naturalistic colors and flattened space.\textsuperscript{99} However, as Bennard Perlman writes, the especially conceptually-dense works in the Armory Show irritated Henri, as evidenced by a sarcastic letter he wrote to the Evening Sun under a pseudonym:

\begin{quote}
I am surprised that my work should be overlooked by every N.Y critic who has written a line about this ultra-modern Armory Show – My work – the work of the only Post-Futurist in the show, has been overlooked….that the work is not visible to the ordinary use of the eye is no excuse….My picture is one that should not be seen – it should be sensed.\textsuperscript{100}
\end{quote}

Henri did, in fact, explore modernism somewhat in his own art. After the Armory Show broke onto American society, he made “secret studio experiments” on canvas, flattening space and exaggerating colors.\textsuperscript{101} Although Henri did not show these experimental works, he did incorporate brighter colors in his post-1913 works. His paintings from La Jolla in 1914 feature vivid backgrounds that were starkly different from his earlier dark, Rembrandt-inspired portrait settings. \textit{Tam Gan} (Fig. 25), one of Henri’s portraits from his summer in La Jolla, exemplifies this use of bolder hues. This painting features a young girl in a bright lilac blouse that vies for

\begin{flushright}
\textsuperscript{98} Ibid. 163.
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\textsuperscript{99} Ibid. 175. Matisse spearheaded the Fauve movement by painting in flat colors, emphasizing pattern over three-dimensionality. Weber was one of the first Americans to paint in the Cubist mode, having become acquainted with it in Europe.
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\textsuperscript{101} Perlman, \textit{Robert Henri}, 110.
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attention with the peach-colored background. Henri rendered the girl’s face in more detail than
her garment or setting, thereby drawing attention to it amidst the bright pastels that surround it.
*Sylvester Smiling,* too, makes use of a rich, colorful palette. The background is deep indigo, and
the young boy’s skin is depicted with a wide range of browns that range from cool to warm.
Even the shadows on Sylvester’s white shirt are brightened to a light blue. Aside from this use of
heightened colors, though, Henri did not break from his realistic style or his preference for child
portraits. He never severed his ties to naturalistic representation.

Experimenting with drastically different art styles such as the disintegrated planes of
Cubism would not express the philosophy of human vitality to Henri’s satisfaction. He rejected
the idea of “art for art’s sake,” where the form of the work is more important than any outside
meaning it might convey. “Art for life’s sake” was the creed Henri proposed instead.102 As
Homer argues, Henri felt his paintings had to convey the beliefs that drove the artist.103 Henri
was concerned with painting his subjects to show their expression of humanity that was common
to all. If a message beyond the paint and the canvas was not transmitted, it was merely an
exercise and not a true piece of art. As he wrote in the letter to the Roberts, “The picture is the
trace of the adventure and to me that is the only reason for valuing a portrait or of its being of
interest in any way to others.”104

**Philosophy of Art and People**

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102 Homer, *Robert Henri and His Circle,* 175.

103 Ibid.

Henri clearly exercised his idealism and interest in humanity in his approach to painting. Where did this optimistic philosophy of art stem from? For his entire career, Henri painted beautiful subjects in idealized, positive works. He seemingly maintained a hopeful outlook on life when other artists, perhaps disillusioned by war, were taking a bleaker view in their work. Henri’s conception of the individual is important to understanding his philosophy and the portraiture that came out of it. He painted people he encountered that he felt represented some larger group, whether national or ethnic.  

105 He painted Irish children that he felt best captured his idea of Irish qualities, and ‘gypsy’ children that he saw as appropriately unburdened with modern civilization. Of course, this idea of expressing the whole in an individual is what constitutes stereotyping. It was not a progressive impulse; most Americans of the era understood people to be grouped in these sorts of ethnic “types.”  

106 Henri’s propensity to stereotype people was not intentionally cynical, but nonetheless bordered on paternalistic. His position as a financially secure, famous white man gave him socioeconomic power that his sitters from marginalized social and ethnic groups did not possess.

In “My People,” an essay Henri published in The Craftsman in 1915, the artist explains his thought process in choosing his models (see appendix). In it, Henri explains his approach to the kinds of people that he favored as models. “His” people are those, almost always from ethnic minorities or immigrant communities, who are authentic to what “Nature intended for them.”  

107 Henri’s illustrations of people types suggest he saw certain common attributes based on ethnicity

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106 Stenz, “Primitivism and Nationalism,” 15.

or age – the Spanish gypsy whose natural state is freedom from urban life, the shy child, or the Irish peasant who is naturally poetic and amusing.\textsuperscript{108}

As Margaret Stenz argues, Henri romanticized the ethnic minorities who were generally lower class, believing them to be more natural and authentic than the upper classes.\textsuperscript{109} His “My People” portraits, the Dutch fishermen and Native American domestics, “typify one of the defining aspects of modernism: the Euro-American primitivistic desire to appropriate the authentic life of the “other” as a counterculture critique.”\textsuperscript{110} In his “My People” article, Henri describes his interest in these particular groups of people: their universal appeal beyond restrictions of family, nationality, and race.\textsuperscript{111} However, Henri’s writings indicate that his search for true liberty was formed by admiration and appropriation of the ‘other’ more than by an admiration for true universality. He attempted, through painting members of working-class ethnic minorities, to show the beauty of “simpler” cultures in an era of rapid change and international conflict.\textsuperscript{112}

On the first page of his article, Henri writes “my love of mankind is individual, not national, and always I find the race expressed in the individual.”\textsuperscript{113} This statement is arguably at odds with itself. How can the artist appreciate the individual while superimposing supposedly

\begin{footnotes}
\item[108] Ibid.
\item[109] Stenz, “Primitivism and Nationalism,” 27-28. Henri was steeped in this peasant romanticism tradition by reading French naturalists such as Guy de Maupassant and Honoré Balzac, as well as Leo Tolstoy. These thinkers elevated the lower classes as more honest, feeling, and expressive than the bourgeoisie.
\item[110] Ibid. 29.
\item[111] Henri, “My People,” 461.
\item[113] Henri, “My People,” 459.
\end{footnotes}
characteristic racial attributes onto him or her? Whether Henri is referring to race as nationality or phenotypic expression (both of which were grouped under the term ‘race’ at the time), either definition places expectations of certain appearance or characteristics on the individual.

This statement, among others, demonstrates the cultural primitivism that Henri exercised in his thinking and his art. Henri’s search for picturesque ‘primitive’ people convinced him to accept Alice Klauber’s invitation to paint in southern California. In a letter to her before leaving for La Jolla, Henri wrote “Of course, I shall want to paint interesting people. I’m told you have… …the half breed and gipsy [sic].”¹¹⁴ This correspondence further demonstrates Henri’s propensity to categorize people as interesting according to supposed racial qualities.

So why are the *Sylvester* portraits notable? If only picturesque or culturally appropriative, why pay attention to Henri’s paintings? I propose that the portraits of Sylvester avoid the cultural primitivism that Henri envisioned in “My People,” and also the modernist impulse toward a primitivism that simplified and decontextualized African culture (which could have been narrowly linked to the African-American subject of the *Sylvester* works). They are on the contrary, I would argue, ideologically modern and optimistically American. Henri did not ascribe to the primitivist views of Africa and African culture that modernism had claimed for its art. While he did tend toward a romantic primitivism in many of his portraits (such as Native American subjects looking stoic while wrapped in traditional blankets (Fig. 26; 1916)), he did not share in the reductive attitude toward Africa. European modernists at this time had developed a visual style that took inspiration from African masks and other objects. Spearheaded by Pablo Picasso, artists experimented with abstractions of the figure by painting and referencing masks and patterns. Patricia Leighten argues that the French modernists drew on African motifs as a

condemnation of French colonialism and barbarism in west and central Africa.\textsuperscript{115} However, she notes that they did not subvert the tendency to reduce Africa to one, monolithic culture that was seen as both mystical and primordial.\textsuperscript{116} French modernists, including Picasso, used these ideas of Africa, the “dark continent,” to reject bourgeois society and taste.

Unlike the romantic primitivism that Henri imagined, this form of primitivism emphasized the African Other that allowed white Europeans to indulge in fantasies of social taboos. Fantastic tales of witchcraft, human sacrifice, and other exotic practices reached Europe through the popular press.\textsuperscript{117} The art that came out of this interest in Africa and its cultural items was dynamic and ground-breaking, leading to new abstractions of human forms and pattern. It was arguably, however, appropriative of African cultures. As Jacqueline Francis states, “if modernists celebrated and embraced primitive values, they nonetheless maintained a dialectical, sovereign relationship with the primitive other.”\textsuperscript{118} The modernists creating primitivist works were highlighting certain aspects of African culture, but from their own positions of European, and later American, cultural power.

As discussed above, Henri, too, tended toward primitivism, but one directed at minority and immigrant groups in America and Europe rather than at Africa. This is not to say that Henri’s philosophy was morally higher or better conceived than that of the modernists, but it does show his tenacious hold on his idea of a distinct American art and ideology. No matter

\footnotesize{\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{116} Leighten, “White Peril,” 610.
\item \textsuperscript{117} Ibid. 611-612.
\end{itemize}}
where he found “his” people to paint, he argued that his—and every American artist’s—work was distinctly American because of how the artist consciously and unconsciously informed his art.\textsuperscript{119} Instead of an imagined African ideal, Henri “fetish[ed] ‘real life’” and authenticity, as witnessed by his philosophies of individual self-actualization, free-form education, and anarchy.\textsuperscript{120} He often saw this authenticity in cultures he deemed simpler and more honest, and in the individuals that he claimed represented their race.

Henri drew on the writings of Ralph Waldo Emerson and Walt Whitman as he formed his own ideas on individuality and personal growth. He was deeply impressed with their philosophies.\textsuperscript{121} He even read to his art students during class from Whitman’s \textit{Leaves of Grass} and Emerson’s \textit{Essays}.\textsuperscript{122} In an essay for the journal \textit{Craftsman}, Henri wrote of his admiration for Whitman and of his shared belief in self-determination:

For it seems to me that before a man tries to express anything to the world he must recognize in himself an individual, a new one, very distinct from others. Walt Whitman did this, and that is why I think his name so often comes to me. The one great cry of Whitman was for a man to find himself, to understand the fine thing he really is if liberated. ... [E]very single person in the world has evidence to give of his own individuality, providing he has acquired the full power to make clear this evidence.\textsuperscript{123}


\textsuperscript{120} Margaret Stenz, \textit{Primitivism and Nationalism in the Portraiture of Robert Henri}, 55.


\textsuperscript{122} Bennard Perlman, \textit{Robert Henri: His Life and Art}, 60.

In Henri’s estimation, there can be no true contributions to society without the development of unique individuality. For Henri, this process of personal growth was made possible by freedom from bourgeois culture. This is likely why he was drawn to paint working-class children such as Sylvester who were growing up outside the upper-class environment. Henri believed that all should be given the chance to be “liberated” from the confines of bourgeois society and to find his or her own individuality. He saw this emancipation at work in Isadora Duncan’s home school, made up of children she had adopted. Unlike those in “home’s narrow confines,” these orphaned children were sincere and attractive to Henri because of their bohemian upbringing.\textsuperscript{124} Duncan’s children were, Henri quipped, “an expression of our present groping toward the freedom of the individual.”\textsuperscript{125} Henri’s impression of these children fits with the archetype of the child-savior as the force of change for a stifled society, one which his portraits seem to recall.

In his political views, too, Henri took a libertarian approach. “We don’t need government or any churches,” he said, “we need more imagination; more need to help and not to interfere; we need to think more.”\textsuperscript{126} To Henri, established systems allowed for greed and led to conflict. “War is impossible without institutionalism,” he wrote, “and institutionalism is the most destructive agent to peace or beauty.”\textsuperscript{127} This last quotation, from 1915, perhaps reflects on the artist’s opinion of the war that was tearing Europe apart at the time. It reveals his enduring belief in the goodness of the individual and the flourishing that comes with liberty and autonomy. War, in Henri’s view, grew out of institutions that caused people to lose sight of their position to others

\textsuperscript{124} Interview with Robert Henri, “Only Out of Home’s Narrow Confines Full Growth Possible for Children, Says Robert Henri.” \textit{New York Tribune} 25 January, 1915. This interview appeared in a \textit{Tribune} that was filled with news from the war in Europe. It appeared on a page with the header “Woman’s Varied Interests” that offered articles on entertaining, the relief effort for Europe, and children raising pets, among others.

\textsuperscript{125} “Only Out of Home,” \textit{New York Tribune}.

\textsuperscript{126} Robert Henri, “The Alice Klauber MS,” in Perlman \textit{Robert Henri: His Life and Art}, 139.

\textsuperscript{127} Henri, “My People,” 460.
and to the cosmos itself. Conflict and wrong action was also linked to failure in aesthetic balance in Henri’s philosophy. In 1915, in “My People,” he reflected on the war:

Everything that is beautiful is orderly, and there can be no order unless things are in their right relation to each other... It is disorder in the mind of man that produces chaos of the kind that brings about such a war as we are today overwhelmed with. It is the failure to see the various phases of life in their ultimate relation that brings about militarism, slavery, the longing of one nation to conquer another, the willingness to destroy for selfish, unhuman purposes. Any right understanding of the proper relation of man to man and man to the universe would make war impossible.128

It could be argued that Henri saw some of the modernisms as the outpourings of disordered minds that he viewed as so destructive. He longed for an ideal society, one where each individual could find wonder and self-worth on their own terms, where great minds had the freedom to flourish. Instead, he saw a culture that had created “minds and souls... so overlaid with fear, with artificiality, that often we do not even recognize beauty.”129 Henri’s world, however, was quickly changing through new technologies and with the start of World War I. As mentioned above, Henri offered selective approval of modern art, championing certain modernists even before the Armory Show. However, his belief that modern movements were misguided suggests that he did not account for the impact of industrial mechanization and of the war on artists. For instance, Henri declared that the art of the Futurists showed their search for individuality and “free expression,” but without successful conclusion.130 Henri advocated visual order and wholeness in art, which may explain why he found fault with artists who used

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129 Henri, Art Spirit, 144-145.

unnatural colors and disintegrated forms to represent life.\textsuperscript{131} Many modern artists eschewed traditionally balanced compositions in favor of fragmented, distorted, or even chaotic pieces that reflected the speed of modern life or the effects of war. In Henri’s opinion, the Futurists and others were therefore conducting interesting experimentation, but were misguided.\textsuperscript{132}

Perhaps Henri felt that truly successful art was that which depicted vitality and resilience in humanity. The artists he consistently praised – Frans Hals, Thomas Eakins, Edouard Manet – did not shy away from the imperfect parts of life, yet still showed their subjects as sound and naturalistic. It is possible that the underlying ideas of modernist works seemed too grim to Henri, leading him to reject the movements they came from. Additionally, Henri shied away from overtly-political art. Although he painted portraits that he felt embodied individualization and personal liberty, his political views were never explicit in his works. Henri did, however, put his altruistic, libertarian beliefs into practice by volunteer-teaching at the anarchist Ferrer Center in New York.\textsuperscript{133} The Center was an anti-authoritarian school that offered classes for children in the day and for adults in the evening. In his art classes there, like elsewhere, he shared his philosophies of life and art. His students came from diverse backgrounds; many were immigrants. Man Ray and Leon Trotsky were among his pupils, the latter only during a brief stay in New York. Even years before his involvement at the progressive Ferrer Center, Henri’s methods of teaching showed his forward thinking. Henri had many female students whom he

\begin{quote}
\textsuperscript{131} Henri, \textit{The Art Spirit}, 96. “All satisfying things are good organizations. The forms are related to each other, there is a dominant movement among them to a supreme conclusion.”
\end{quote}

\begin{quote}
\textsuperscript{132} Henri, \textit{The Art Spirit}, 51. Henri may have had more common ground with the Futurists than he knew when he wrote on the “mysterious” fourth dimension, an invisible dynamic that fascinated Futurist thinkers. Henri’s interest in the fourth dimension did not lead him to paint forms in motion like the Futurists did, but the ideological rapport existed. Henri wrote: “I am certain that we do deal in an unconscious way with another dimension than the well-known three. …deep in us there is always a grasp of proportions which exist over and through the obvious three, and it is by this power of super-proportioning that we reach the inner meaning of things.”
\end{quote}

\begin{quote}
\textsuperscript{133} Perlman, \textit{Robert Henri}, 103-104. At the Ferrer Center, Henri met Emma Goldman, a famous author and speaker who championed controversial ideas such as birth control. Henri greatly admired her philosophy and politics, aligning himself with several reform campaigns she worked on.
\end{quote}
taught both at women’s schools and privately. He approached his female students as serious artists who were pursuing truth in painting.\textsuperscript{134} (Many at the time viewed painting for women as merely a premarital hobby). He encouraged individuality and critical thinking in his students rather than certain techniques or finishes. He accepted commercial artists and newspaper illustrators as students who were not eligible to study under traditional teachers.\textsuperscript{135} Henri’s students found him to be enthusiastic, articulate, and innovative.

\textbf{The Sylvester Portraits}

How do Henri’s philosophies of art and life pertain to his \textit{Sylvester} portraits, the subject of this paper? Are they “My People” portraits that depict the sitter’s culture through the artist’s own ideas? I argue, on the contrary, that Henri’s three portraits of Sylvester are noteworthy because they do not envision cultural primitivism like the artist’s other “My People” portraits. Henri set out for La Jolla to paint the ‘other,’ people from alleged exotic cultures like Native American nations. At the end of the summer, however, the Sylvester portraits were arguably his most interesting works. In these paintings, Henri achieved his goal of showing the beauty of life, as expressed through a vibrant individual. Sylvester is not typed by class or ethnic background; he is a young boy who shows his humanity in each portrait, whether awake or asleep. These portraits embody Henri’s ideas at their best. In them, Henri does not seem to speak for the subject, to “tell about them through my own language.”\textsuperscript{136} Instead, Sylvester speaks for himself.

\textsuperscript{134} Perlman, \textit{Robert Henri : His Life and Art}, 24.

\textsuperscript{135} Perlman, 55-57. Henri appreciated the quick work and urban subject matter of newspaper art. His fellow Ashcan artists John Sloan, George Luks, Everett Shinn, and William Glackens all began as newspaper sketch artists who made and exhibited paintings with Henri’s encouragement.

\textsuperscript{136} Henri, “My People,” 459.
As discussed in chapter 2, Henri did not partake in racial stereotyping in an era when grotesque black figures were used for everything from decorating homes to selling soap. His few portraits that depict black subjects are naturalistic and flattering, with no trace of racist caricature or condescension. These subjects are titled with their names or with their occupation, rather than epithets like “mammy.” Henri’s paintings are a far cry from popular imagery such as George Luks’s *Mose and the Pickaninnies Have a Crap Game and Uncle Remus Enjoys It*, with its ghoulish cast of black stock characters (Fig. 23).

Henri painted three portraits of Sylvester Cunningham Smith during his summer in La Jolla. Ten-year-old Sylvester sold newspapers in the La Jolla train station, and possibly on the train as well. He must have commuted to La Jolla from San Diego, where he lived until at least 1930, according to the census from that year. La Jolla was created as a resort town that offered a countryside retreat for wealthy city-dwellers. Although black Californians could find better salaries there than elsewhere in the region, they were almost exclusively from service jobs for white La Jollans. Sylvester was part of this working class. What did Henri see in Sylvester that prompted him to paint his portrait? He was the only African-American sitter that Henri painted while in California, being mostly interested in painting Native Americans who lived in the region. This fact suggests that Henri was drawn to Sylvester’s appearance or personality on an individual level, rather than on an ethnic or racial level that drove many of his portraits.

Henri painted Sylvester three times, using large canvases. (The two known paintings are 24 by 20 inches, and 41 by 33 inches, respectively; *Negro Boy (Sylvester)* is likely large, as

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137 *U.S. Census of Population and Housing, 1930: San Diego, California.*


well). After completing these paintings, Henri wrote to his mother about working with the young boy:

I have also a good portrait of a negro boy laughing – great youngster … … the victrola kept him awake and kept his feet patting the floor the last time he posed – before that when he posed he could not keep awake – I had him sitting like the prince of Africa in one of Mrs Richmond’s beautiful high backed chairs, but he could not keep up the state of prince – fell into a deep sleep…He went to sleep and I painted him so the picture might well be called the “Failure of Sylvester.”

Henri’s reference to posing Sylvester like “the prince of Africa” suggests he was drawn to something regal or noble in the young boy’s demeanor. It also exposes his idea that certain individuals express their entire “race,” here linking the young Californian with the people of Africa (then thought of as a race). However, as mentioned above, Henri did not seek out black models in particular to capture an essentialist racial “essence,” nor did he appropriate various African aesthetics to comment on imagined primal societies. Sylvester likely caught the artist’s eye because of his individuality.

The artist’s frontal, three-quarter length portrait *Negro Boy (Sylvester)* (Fig. 3) depicts Sylvester sitting upright with his clasped hands resting between his knees. He looks past the viewer with a slightly downcast gaze, perhaps part contemplation and part fatigue. He is posed on a chair or pedestal draped with fabric. The choppy, angular brushstrokes behind Sylvester’s figure heighten the level of visual interest in the background, a stylistic change for Henri. Some of the square strokes to the right of the subject appear Cezanne-like, thick and opaque (although the original color painting may show more color gradation in this area). Like the brighter, paler hues Henri began using in his La Jolla portraits, this use of visual texture and pattern in the

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background may reflect the influence of modern works from the Armory Show. Sylvester himself, however, is modelled with three-dimensionality. His head and neck appear especially rounded and life-like; his bone structure appears almost tangible. The solidity of the head contrasts with the rougher paint handling of the boy’s clothing and background. The background visually supports the three-dimensional figure because of its relative flatness and simplicity, exemplifying Henri’s observation that “[The background] is as important to the head before it as the pier is important to the bridge it carries.”

In Negro Boy (Sylvester), the subject appears dignified and calm, almost beyond his years. Like Velázquez did in his portraits of the Spanish royal children, Henri imbued his young sitter with gravity and poise without obscuring his childlike essence. Furthermore, there is no physiognomic caricature or stereotyped subtext to the work, such as that seen in The Aunt Jemima Slide or in I Know’d It Was Ripe, respectively. Neither does Henri sentimentalize Sylvester as a newsboy type as did J.G. Brown with his young models. Although the painting is now lost, the black and white photograph shows that Negro Boy (Sylvester) is an individualistic, serious portrait of the young boy.

Sylvester Smiling, the portrait that Henri exhibited most often of the three, shows the young boy in a more relaxed pose (Fig. 1). Here, Sylvester slouches slightly, his white shirt rumpled. His eyes look off to the side and his face is caught in a moment of near-laughter. Although Sylvester appears cheerful, he is not caricatured as an absurdly happy and simple pickaninny type, as one contemporary reviewer described him. Henri depicts Sylvester’s face

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143 Antony Anderson. “Henri’s Types,” Los Angeles Times, Sep 27, 1914. The art critic Anderson took a myopic, racist view of the subjects of Henri’s portraits. To him, Henri’s paintings of Chinese-American girls depicted “dolls,” his painting of a Mexican boy showed the subject’s pride and indolence, and his portraits of Native American girls were appropriately “inscrutable” and “cryptic.” He described Sylvester Smiling as “that happy-go-lucky, grinning nigger boy….”
with a multitude of saturated, red-brown hues that form the smooth planes of his high cheekbones, full lips, and square forehead. The boy’s expression is happy but also complex; his glinting eyes appear wistful or perhaps knowing. As in *Negro Boy (Sylvester)*, Henri here uses light and shadow to depict the subject’s head as believably solid and three-dimensional, while painting the clothing in a more sketch-like manner. The dark background recalls his earlier portraits, such as *Eva Green*, although the deep blue of the background and the brighter colors in general depart from his earlier, neutral palette.

Sylvester’s hands are painted with fewer colors than his face, mainly a purplish-brown that dissolves off the bottom edge of the canvas. The lower half of the composition, in general, is more roughly painted. Smudges of olive green and brown make up the trousers. The lower sections of the sleeves dissolve into unrefined paint strokes of cream, and blue, the purple-brown of his forearms showing through at places. Although the brushstrokes are thick and textural, their length and direction convincingly model the solid forms of Sylvester’s face and clothing. Henri’s brushwork is not highly visible for its own sake, but to depict his subject in a spontaneous, realistic manner. In the style of his artistic heroes Hals, Velázquez, and Rembrandt, Henri successfully models his young sitter’s expression and figure with colorful, textural paint strokes. *Sylvester Smiling* is especially reminiscent of these artists, combining the dark background and highlighted figure common to their portraiture. The vigorous, sometimes slashing brushstrokes recall Hals’s and Velázquez’s paint handling. Each of the *Sylvester*

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144 In *The Art Spirit*, Henri expounds on the brushstroke: “The stroke may make or it may destroy the integrity of the forms. (71)” The brushstroke, he felt, reveals the artist’s intention and feeling – is it timid? Steady? Generous? Fittingly as regards *Sylvester Smiling*, Henri said “There are strokes which laugh, and there are strokes which bind laughter, which freeze the face into a set immovable grimace. (70).” The spontaneity and naturalness that show in Sylvester’s expression prove that Henri achieved the former.
portraits uses a single-sitter composition that focuses on the subject’s features and expression, much in the style of Henri’s Old Master favorites.

It is significant that the subject of these paintings is titled by name. He is Sylvester Cunningham Smith, a specific individual rather than a character type like thepickanniny, described in chapter 2. In one portrait, the epithet “negro boy” is accompanied by his name, but this is not unlike other portraits of children that Henri titled descriptively such as *Irish Lad* (1913) and *Irish Boy* (1925). The reviewer who mocked Sylvester for having a “proud” name must have recognized the dignity that comes with naming, one which he clearly felt the young boy was not entitled to. In a time when ‘boy’ and ‘uncle’ were deemed appropriate addresses for black males, the fact that Henri titles his portraits with Sylvester’s name is notable.

Despite his individuality and title, Sylvester in these portraits also functions on the archetypal level discussed in chapter 1. Situated among Henri’s many portraits of children, the *Sylvester* paintings are unique iterations of the heroic child type. These paintings are among many Henri portraits of children, but one of his very few portraits of black children. The subject’s vitality in *Sylvester Smiling* suggests optimism and hope. In *Negro Boy (Sylvester)*, the poised young man exudes confidence and industriousness, the latter evinced by his neat clothing. The fact that Sylvester is African American perhaps makes him a symbol of hope for his skewed, unjust society. In the words of Carl Jung, these artworks are “at work educating the spirit of the age, conjuring up the forms in which the age is most lacking.”

145 Henri’s time was lacking in representative imagery of black Americans or of any people of African descent. 146 Sylvester,

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146 Guy McElroy’s introductory essay, “Race and Representation” in *Facing Blackness: - gives a brief but illuminating discussion on the power of imagery and stereotypes in the public conception of black Americans.*
with his deeply-hued skin, is a response to the prevailing visual climate of Progressive-Era America. He is an archetype surfacing to answer the need of the age. Although it is unlikely that Henri viewed them as such, his Sylvester portraits are emblems of societal equality as well as sympathetic portraits of a young San Diegan.

How, then, can *The Failure of Sylvester* be read (Fig. 2)? This piece shows the young boy asleep in the plush chair the artist posed him on, head resting on his shoulder. In this painting, Sylvester is neither alert nor actively confident, possibly opposing the symbolic undertone of the other two portraits. He appears small in relation to the adult-sized chair he occupies. Does this image play into stereotypes of laziness, as in Winslow Homer’s painting of black youths *Army Boots* (Fig. 20)? As he described in his letter to his mother, Henri chose to title the painting of Sylvester asleep as his “failure,” ostensibly as a humorous gesture. So titled, this work may reveal a reluctance to depict black subject hood: Sylvester is unaware of and objectified by the artist’s and our gaze. Furthermore, Henri never depicted any black adults in his “My People” portraiture (although he depicted adult subjects of other ethnicities and races). This may reflect a view of black people as infantile, a notion perpetuated by the visual and entertainment culture described in Chapter 2. *The Failure of Sylvester* does not blatantly mock its subject, yet it is unclear if this composition subtly affirms racist stereotypes. It is possible, however, that this painting is merely Henri’s attempt to document the unplanned moment when his subject failed to stay awake.

In comparison to the rest of his oeuvre, this piece stands out compositionally. It deviates from Henri’s usual design of a sitter framed against a dark background. As Richard Powell points out, in reference to an earlier portrait of a black subject, the dark subject-light background
combination inverts the traditional portrait formula of a pale subject against a dark setting.\footnote{Richard Powell. \textit{Cutting a Figure: Fashioning Black Portraiture} (Chicago, London: University of Chicago Press, 2008): 31.} In \textit{The Failure of Sylvester}, a light gold and green chair against a bluish-white background vies for attention with Sylvester’s sleeping form. The chair back, upholstered in fern-patterned cloth, occupies approximately the upper third of the painting. These elements, and Sylvester’s bright white shirt, offset his mahogany skin and dark green shorts. Henri’s expertly-placed strokes suggest the velvety texture of the chair upholstery, the glossiness of the varnished wood, the smoothness of the sitter’s skin, and the draping of his clothing. Compositionally, the curving sweep of the ornate chair back frames Sylvester’s head and shoulders, below which his arms, elbows, and clasped hands form a diamond. The rounded forms of the chair create a pleasing visual counterpoint to the angularity of the sleeping child. Sylvester’s scrawny child’s legs form another visual diamond at the bottom of the picture, and are closest to the viewer in pictorial space. The perspective created by Sylvester’s legs and the chair receding into space gives the image a sense of depth greater than usual in Henri’s portraits. This dynamic perspective, combined with the almost-equal weight given to the sitter and his chair, makes \textit{The Failure of Sylvester} seemingly about composition more than its subject’s spirit or expression. Sylvester’s “failure,” then, may be merely a moment of humanity that Henri found visually appealing. However, the young boy’s trusting slumber perhaps exemplifies the authenticity that Henri searched for in his “My People” portraits. \textit{The Failure of Sylvester} shows a truly natural moment; it has neither the posed sentimentality of Brown’s \textit{Tuckered Out – The Shoeshine Boy} nor the self-conscious cultural primitivism of Henri’s \textit{Indian, Ricardo} and other “My People” portraits.
In *The Art Spirit*, Henri praised Walt Whitman, whose work he deemed “an autobiography” that lived on and would grow greater and more well-known with time.\(^\text{148}\) Perhaps Henri, who modelled his philosophy and lifestyle after Whitman, was hoping the same would be said of his work in the future. Henri positioned himself as a man and artist free of “that cruel, fearful possession known as patriotism,” and of “blind, intense devotion for an institution.”\(^\text{149}\) In *The Art Spirit*, Henri is recorded as saying “every great artist is a man who has freed himself from his family, his nation, his race. Every man who has shown the world the way to beauty, to true culture, has been a rebel, a “universal” without patriotism, without home, who has found his people everywhere…”\(^\text{150}\) The similarities in Henri’s descriptions of great artists and of himself are unmistakable. Were he alive today, Henri would likely be disappointed that his life and oeuvre are not commonly included with other great artists and thinkers of the 20\(^{\text{th}}\) century. As Perlman expressed it, Henri’s “rich and stimulating philosophy had simply developed early and remained frozen in time,” and this led to an art that stagnated as well.\(^\text{151}\) I would argue, though, that his *Sylvester* portraits deserve attention among his hundreds of portraits of children, and amid the modern art upheaval that was taking place. In the context of his portraiture, these images successfully show the dignity of their subject, the quality that Henri described as seeking in “My People.” Without obvious caricature or stereotype, these works are conceptually modern for their time, even though visually conservative compared to the European modernists of the Armory Show. At the end of the Progressive Era, when black Americans were


\(^{149}\) Henri, “My People,” 459.

\(^{150}\) Henri, *The Art Spirit*, 144.

still deeply marginalized and abused by white Americans, Henri’s portraits stand out as archetypal symbols of hope for progress.

These three *Sylvester* portraits are sincere and expressive in a way that Henri hoped all of his “My People” portraits were. *The Failure of Sylvester*, especially, depicts the subject’s humanity. But where most of his portraits appear, as Margaret Stenz argues, to be “performed authenticity” for the white viewer, the images of the young newsboy appear to truly express the individuality of their sitter.\(^{152}\) From a broader view, these paintings are a visual rebuttal of white America’s visual cultural hegemony. Henri left no writing or action that suggests he was interested in civil rights for black Americans, but these portraits nonetheless suggest an alternative to the racist ideology of his time, albeit from a white observer’s perspective.

Robert Henri’s *Sylvester* paintings draw together romantic notions of idealized childhood and individuality with the painterly aesthetic of Velázquez, Rembrandt and other Old Master artists. His style emulates the sensitive paintings of children by Dutch artist Frans Hals, but the American artist celebrates childhood as pure and admirable rather than using children to depict moral lessons, as in the Dutch tradition. Made in 1914, the *Sylvester* portraits are also situated in a wider context of historical convergences; traditional art meeting the modernists, and the Progressive Era ceding to the World War I era. Henri’s *Sylvester* works function as an archetypal response to his ever-changing, ‘over-civilized’ society, a clear iteration of Henri’s humanist philosophy. His bold, easily-legible portraits were mostly uninfluenced by modern art that swept in with the Armory Show, and by the upheaval of a world war. In the *Sylvester* portraits, the sincerity of the youthful subject marks him as the child savior, a response to a perceived lack in American culture. I argue, though, that the portraits of Sylvester respond, not only to modernity, but also to the overwhelmingly racist culture of imagery that targeted the black body for ridicule.

\(^{152}\) Stenz, 57.
Henri’s obsession with child subjects led him to paint Sylvester one summer in La Jolla. The portraits are energetic and well-executed, but it is their subject, Sylvester himself, who speaks to us one century later as both an archetypal figure and as an individual.
Illustrations

Figure 1. Robert Henri, *Sylvester Smiling*, 1914, Private Collection.
Figure 2. Robert Henri, *The Failure of Sylvester*, 1914, The Cheekwood Museum of Art
Figure 3. Robert Henri, *Negro Boy (Sylvester)*, 1914, location unknown.
Figure 4. Robert Henri, *Willie Gee*, 1904, Newark Museum.
Figure 5. Robert Henri, *Eva Green*, 1907, Wichita Art Museum
Figure 6. Robert Henri, *Laughing Child*, 1907, Whitney Museum of American Art
Figure 7. Robert Henri, *Dutch Joe (Jopie van Slouten)*, 1910, Milwaukee Art Museum
Figure 8. Frans Hals, *Laughing Boy*, c. 1625, The Mauritshuis
Figure 9. Diego Velázquez, *Portrait of the Infanta Maria-Margarita at Age Four*, c. 1653, The Louvre
Figure 10. Currier and Ives, *Little Brother and Sister*, 1863
Figure 11. J.G. Brown, *Give Him a Light*, 1889, Private collection.
Figure 12. John George Brown, *Tuckered Out – The Shoeshine Boy*, c. 1888, Museum of Fine Arts Boston
Figure 13. Robert Henri, *Brown-Eyed Boy*, 1926, Baltimore Museum of Art
Figure 14. Uncle Remus Brand Syrup Label, c. 1920s
Google Images search “Uncle Remus”
Figure 15. *Hold Dat Train!* Pub. Southern Music Publishing Co. 1909
The Lester S. Levy Sheet Music Collection, Box 57, Item 145
Figure 16. *The Aunt Jemima Slide* Pub. Hugh McNutt, 1917
The Lester S. Levy Sheet Music Collection, Box 151, Item 55
Figure 17. Early 1900s Chocolate Eyes Ad Art Church Fan
Personal collection, Etsy shop 4wheeldreams
http://img0.etsystatic.com/000/0/5940612/il_570xN.275863456.jpg
Figure 18. Ceramic Pickaninny
Jim Crow Museum of Racist Memorabilia, Ferris State University
http://www.ferris.edu/htmls/news/jimcrow/picaninny/more/ceramic.jpg
Figure 19. Winslow Homer, *Watermelon Boys*, 1876, Cooper-Hewitt, National Design Museum
Figure 20. Winslow Homer, *Army Boots*, 1865, Hirshorn Museum and Sculpture Garden
Figure 21. Thomas Hovenden, *I Know'd It Was Ripe*, 1865, Brooklyn Museum
Figure 22. George Bellows, *Tin Can Battle, San Juan Hill, New York*, 1907, Sheldon Museum of Art
Figure 23. George Luks, "Mose and the Pickaninnies Have a Crap Game and Uncle Remus Enjoys It," *World*, 2 June 1897
Figure 24. Wayman Adams, *New Orleans Mammy*, 1920, Morris Museum of Art
Figure 25. Robert Henri, *Tam Gan*, 1914, Albright-Knox Art Gallery
Figure 26. Robert Henri, *Indian, Ricardo*, 1916, University of New Mexico Art Museum
Appendix


“The people I like to paint are “my people,” whoever they may be, wherever they may exist, the people through whom dignity of life is manifest, that is, who are in some way expressing themselves naturally along the lines Nature intended for them. My people may be old or young, rich or poor, I may speak their language or I may communicate with them only by gestures. But wherever I find them, the Indian at work in the white man’s way, the Spanish gypsy moving back to the freedom of the hills, the little boy, quiet and reticent before the stranger, my interest is awakened and my impulse immediately is to tell about them through my own language – drawing and painting in color.

I find as I go out, from one land to another seeking “my people,” that I have none of that cruel, fearful possession knows as patriotism; no blind, intense devotion for an institution that has stiffened in chains of its own making. My love of mankind is individual, not national, and always I find the race expressed in the individual. And so I am ‘patriotic” only about what I admire, and my devotion to humanity burns up as brightly for Europe as for America; it flares up as swiftly for Mexico if I am painting the peon there; it warms toward the bull-fighter in Spain, if, in spite of its cruelty, there is that element in his art which I find beautiful; it intensifies before the Irish peasant whose love, poetry, simplicity and humor have enriched my existence, just as completely as though each of these people were of my own country and my own hearthstone. Everywhere I see at times this beautiful expression of the dignity of life, to which I respond with a wish to preserve this beauty of humanity for my friends to enjoy.

This think that I call dignity in a human being is inevitably the result of an established order in the universe. Everything that is beautiful is orderly, and there can be no order unless things are in their right relation to each other. Of this right relation throughout the world beauty is born. A musical scale, the sword motif for instance in the Ring, is order in sound; sculpture as Donatello saw it, big, sure, infinite, is order in proportion; painting, in which the artist has the wisdom that ordained the rainbow is order in color; poetry, -- Whitman, Ibsen, Shelley, each is supreme order in verbal expression. It is not too much to say that art is the noting of the existence of order throughout the world, and so, order stirs imagination and inspires one to reproduce this beautiful relationship existing in the universe, as best one can. Everywhere I find that the moment order in Nature is understood and freely shown, the result is nobility; -- the Irish peasant has nobility of language and facial expression the North American Indian has nobility of poise, of gesture; nearly all children have nobility of impulse. This orderliness must exist or the world could not hold together, and it is a vision of orderliness that enables the artist along any line whatsoever to capture and present through his imagination the wonder that stimulates life.”
Bibliography


Stenz, Margaret A. “Primitivism and nationalism in the portraiture of Robert Henri.” PhD. diss., City University of New York, 2002.


